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ABSTRACT

Much of the thinking and writing about typical student affairs organizations has been grounded in core assumptions consistent with scientific and bureaucratic models of organizing. These questionable assumptions describe how things are supposed to work; however, most divisions of student affairs operate under multiple and sometimes competing preferences. Student affairs professionals often work in conditions which are ambiguous, conflictual, and harried. Richer and more descriptive counter assumptions about the organization as it really is suggest that interdependence between people and programs is more often loose than tight; staff are diverse and sometimes in conflict with the division's goals; and rational, systematic decision making is often compromised. In this context, extraordinary aspects of ordinary divisions of student affairs are those processes, characteristics, or behaviors which exceed normal limits, are consistent with the values and purposes of the institution, contribute to a sense of well-being, and energize the work environment. In extraordinary student affairs divisions efforts at innovation are celebrated whether or not they are successful; opportunities for professional growth are available to all, but concentrated on those most likely to benefit; ordinary competence and high quality day-to-day relations with students and faculty are maintained; and ordinary programs can be suspended to enable some staff to do other things. Extraordinary student affairs leaders have a clear sense of what is important to those they lead, create a supportive work environment, have a sense of humor, and resist making "much ado about nothing." (MCF)

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What Is Extraordinary About Ordinary Student Affairs Organizations

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What Is Extraordinary About Ordinary Student Affairs Organizations

The purpose of this paper is to describe behaviors in otherwise ordinary student affairs organizations that are unusual and merit promotion. I refer to these as extraordinary.

Identifying the extraordinary is in vogue. It was inevitable that the search for excellence in business and industry (Peters & Waterman, 1982) would stimulate studies of exceptional schools (Clark, Lotto & Astuto 1984) and universities (Cross, 1984; Whetten, 1984). The search for "keys" to organizational effectiveness is an illustration of our need to know, to be in control, to exert some influence over destiny. In all fields information is being ammassed in an effort to improve or maximize effectiveness.

Primers describing "one minute managers" (Blanchard & Johnson, 1983) and "59 second employees" (Andre & Ward, 1984) promise "cures" or solutions to persistent problems. In student affairs, these solutions sometimes take the form of cost-benefit ratios, higher retention rates, and improved staff morale.

But the lessons of the past decade suggest that little influence can be exerted over many systemic processes in societal institutions. For example, economists cannot accurately predict, let alone control, business cycles, oil prices, and currency exchange rates. George Meany once referred to economics as the only field in which someone could rise to emminence by being wrong (Griffiths, 1985). Even Malcolm Forbes, Jr. recently lamented, "too bad [we] can't sue economists for malpractice" (1984, p. 23).

In recent years, culture, or networks of meanings through which an

organization communicates its ideologies, norms and values (Trice & Beyer, 1984), has been used frequently to illuminate some of the more interesting qualities of excellent public schools and IHEs as well as industries. Like other organizations, student affairs units are symbolic abstractions, "and we may understand them [and ourselves] with only as much ease or difficulty as we can understand the culture in which they are imbedded" (Greenfield, 1984, p. 145). One approach to understanding culture is to figure out what is common and widely accepted by the people who live and work therein.

In the following pages, I will identify and unpack selected extraordinary operating principles and leadership behaviors in student affairs work. First, the evolution of organizational theory over the past 60 years will be briefly summarized to provide a point of reference for considering extraordinary behavior in student affairs. Then, some concepts from cultural anthropology are used as a lens or filter to interpret what seem to be extraordinary aspects of student affairs work distilled from the literature on effective educational institutions.

A Synopsis of the Evolution of Organizational Theory

Much of the thinking and writing about typical student affairs organizations has been grounded in several core assumptions which are consistent with scientific and bureacratic models of organizing (e.g., Taylor, 1911). These assumptions are not particularly surprising although they have not received a lot of attention in the student affairs literature (c.f., Kuh, 1981, 1983a, 1984a). Briefly, the questionable assumptions are:

(1) The student affairs division is a self-correcting rational system comprised of closely linked, interdependent people;

(2) The student affairs division has consensus on preferences and the means to attain those preferences;

(3) Tasks are coordinated through the dissemination of information to pertinent parties in a timely fashion; and

(4) Problems can be anticipated and solved (Sergiovanni, 1984).

A system of corollary aphorisms also has evolved: (a) decisions are data-driven and are communicated quickly and efficiently to those who need and are responsible for knowing; (b) detailed job descriptions help staff apportion their time to the most important activities; (c) staff have well-defined areas of authority and responsibility, and make decisions consistent with these definitions; and (d) rewards and sanctions are based on meritorious performance and instititional priorities (Kuh, 1983b).

That's how things are supposed to work. But imagine a student affairs division in which the following multiple and sometimes competing preferences are coterminous: (1) reducing attrition, (2) fostering students' moral development, (3) remediating students' learning deficiencies, (4) enhancing students' leadership skills, (5) encouraging personal and professional renewal among staff, (6) ameliorating alcohol abuse among students, and (7) identifying ways to reduce the base budget.

Imagine a student affairs division in which some staff are uncertain about how and why decisions are made. Pretend that residence hall staff don't know and possibly don't care about the difficulties encountered by the Greek advisor or financial aids officer. Is it possible that information of interest to those who are supposed to "know" often is communicated in incomplete form, or is delivered late, or is misinterpreted, or is forgotten, or is not passed along at all?

Of course these imaginings are not a nightmare, but a kaleidescopic

view of what life is like in most divisions of student affairs most of the time. And when collective experience is honestly acknowledged, traditional expectations for rational, orderly, and planful behavior no longer seem instructive for understanding what happens in student affairs work environments.

It is true--the conditions under which student affairs professionals work are often ambiguous, conflictual, and hurried. Staff seldom have the time or even the inclination to make decisions based on reasoned appraisals of empirically validated alternatives, the process suggested by proponents of bureaucratic organizations. More often, political issues outweigh substantive issues, and tough problems such as alcohol misuse and racism reappear time and time again without a permanent solution (Lotto, 1984).

Of course, student affairs divisions are not without some structure and meaning, particularly if a strong "culture" exists. But when uncertainty exists, it does not result from randomness. According to "Jacques Monod in Chance and Necessity, the random possibility of anything happening in the particular way it did happen is pretty near impossible [to anticipate] beforehand, but once it does happen, the odds in favor of it having happened are 100 percent. This seems rather obvious, to the point of idiocy, but that fact does not necessarily rule out the possiblility of a good many eminent [organizational theorists] overlooking it" (Estling, 1983, p. 619).

Over the last 15 years, some counter assumptions about life in institutions of higher education have been posited that are descriptively richer and more powerful. The first counter assumption is that interdependence or coupling between people and programs is more often loose than tight. That is, typically action (or inaction) in one unit

does not affect, in a causal manner, what takes place in another unit. Of course, there are exceptions--an admissions office that does not meet its enrollment targets can have a profound direct influence on all student affairs staff! But in most circumstances, the student activities staff remain unaffected by what goes on in financial aids, the residence life staff are functionally independent of the career planning staff, and recreational sports programs are uncoupled from veterans affairs.

A second counterassumption is that the preferences of staff are diffuse, diverse, often highly personal in nature, and sometimes conflict with the articulated goals of the student affairs division. The student activities director is committed to providing leadership development opportunities for undergraduates, the career counselor desires to attract more recruiters to campus, and the residence life director is preoccupied with the safety of students housed in on-campus housing. All exhibit different preferences, perspectives, priorities and ambitions which makes it difficult to attain consensus about the best use of resources (Hull, Hunter & Kuh, 1983).

Finally, decisionmaking and other behaviors in IHEs are mindful of organized anarchy; that is, for factors peculiar to IHEs, rational, systematic decision processes are often compromised (Cohen, March & Olsen, 1972). Decisions often are made quickly, sometimes in the absence of individuals (who are away from the campus attending professional meetings or rendering service to other institutions) with important information to contribute. Remember, these are typical, not unusual occurences (Kuh, 1983b).

This alternative set of assumptions is offered not to suggest that student affairs organizations are unfortunate places to work, or that they

suffer from debilitating organizational infirmities. Things are no worse in student affairs than anywhere else in the institution nor are the conditions these counter assumptions describe necessarily counter-productive. Rather, these perspectives portray the organization as it is--rather than describing what it should be according to classical bureaucratic assumptions about organizing.

This is the context in which the following assertions about extraordinary behavior are grounded. The 12 assertions are distilled from organizational theory and the research on effective schools and colleges. This litany is not exhaustive; rather the assertions illustrate selected characteristics of student affairs units that can be described as extraordinary.

What Is Extraordinary In Student Affairs Organizations?

Extraordinary aspects of ordinary divisions of student affairs are those processes, characteristics or behaviors which exceed normal limits, are consistent with the values and ourposes of the institution, contribute to a sense of personal well-being, and energize the work environment. No claim is made that these factors directly encourage students' development. However, I contend that when some of these extraordinary characteristics are present, the human development goals of the academy can be pursued with even greater zeal and sense of mission.

Organizational Processes

Assertion 1: In extraordinary student affairs divisions, efforts that attempt the unusual are celebrated, whether or not an innovation is successfully implemented.

In ordinary student affairs units, successful work groups are recognized and those that fail--in efforts to innovate or to merely maintain the status quo with anonymity (and sometimes impunity)--are ignored. Whetten (1984) differentiated between a "fail-safe" system and a "safe-fail" system. A fail-safe policy is risk aversive; a safe-fail approach is risk seeking or at least risk neutral. The culture of the extraordinary student affairs unit encourages taking risks, and makes it safe to fail; those who fail in the process of trying to improve or innovate are not punished or disadvantaged. Quite the contrary! The extraordinary student affairs unit sends a clear message: experimentation, innovation, and risk-taking are valued.

Assertion 2: Extraordinary student affairs units make opportunities for professional growth available to all, but concentrate resources on those most likely to benefit.

Ordinary student affairs organizations encourage staff to reach for new levels of performance; many provide staff development opportunities. These activities often take the form of "rites of renewal" (Trice & Beyer, 1984). That is, staff development exercises are "relatively elaborate, [sometimes] dramatic, planned sets of activities that consolidate various forms of cultural expressions into one event" (p. 655). In the student affairs culture, these expressions include acknowledgement of the importance of continuing development over the life span and staying current with new, innovative student affairs practices.

What follows rubs against conventional wisdom, is contrary to persuasive arguments concerning the expandable limits of human potential (Cross, 1984), and smacks of blasphemy to those dedicated to encouraging the optimal development of all those in the academy. Nevertheless, the 1/3,

1/3, 1/3 maxim seems to hold. About a third of the staff in a typical student affairs division are outstanding professionals who will continue to acquire new knowledge and skills and make positive contributions in spite of any obstacles they encounter. They are institutional treasures; invite them to participate in professional development activities, but don't be disappointed or surprised if they find more interesting things to do.

Another third are not likely to improve their performance or change the nature of their contributions no matter what is done. Of course, every once in a while someone from this down under group salvages themselves. And, make no mistake, their participation in staff development activities should be encouraged, not discouraged. Indeed, every effort must be made to ensure that staff development activities do not become "rites of degradation" for some. Nevertheless, the great majority of the time, efforts specifically directed to those in this category will not be successful.

Staff development should be targeted to those in the middle third, individuals with the potential to be refocused, redirected, and renewed. In general, these tend to be either relatively young staff with ten or fewer years of fulltime experience, or those with shifting "career anchors," whose professional identity and support are in transition. For example, it is not uncommon for staff around the age of 40 to be secure enough financially and socially to begin to seek other forms of professional stimulation and responsiblity. Opportunities specifically designed to challenge developed for persons in this group are more likely to pay dividends for both the individual and the institution (see Frank-Fox, 1983; Nelson, 1981).

Assertion 3: A student affairs division becomes extraordinary when staff recognize that the organization profits most from ordinary competence as staff "stick to the knitting" (Peters & Waterman, 1982) and maintain high quality day-to-day relations with students and faculty.

It is quite ordinary for student affairs units to be in constant flux in terms of policies, practices, personnel, and resources. This is contrary to the notion that organizations are relatively stable, rigid bureaucratic structures. In fact,

> "Change is ubiquitous in organizations; and...change [usually] is the result neither of extraordinary organizational porcesses or forces, nor of uncommon imagination, persistence, or skill. It is a result of relatively stable processes that relate [and help] organizations [adapt] to their environments...Environments are responded to, but they are also affected" (March, 1984, pp.20-21).

Personnel changes, resulting from external recruitment or internal reassignments, are common in student affairs units, as are shifting job responsibilities, committee assignments, and cyclical faculty interest in student life. These things are ordinary.

March (1984) suggested that to make an organization more responsive, "massive mucking around" or sweeping reforms should be resisted. Rather, more attention should be given to the minor routines by which things get done. Like other administrators, most student affairs staff spend much of their time talking to faculty and students about minor things, making trivial decisions, attending meetings with unimportant agendas, and responding to the little irritants of student life. Of course, "rules need to be understood in order to be interpreted [to students]...simple breakdowns in the flow of supplies [and services] need to be minimized;

telephones and letters need to be answered, accounts and records need to be maintained. The importance of simple competence in the routines of organizational life is often overlooked" (p. 23) and undervalued.

Staff in ordinary divisions of student affairs take seriously the welfare and development of students. But members of the extraordinary student affairs division consider students to be <u>their sacred living trust</u>. There is no greater service or reward than to care and nurture the current generation of college students. Accomplishing all this may involve considerable planning, complex coordination, and many rules and policies. But the extraordinary nature of the enterprise is that many people perform with competence what appear to be minor, mundane, sometimes trivial things as they care for students.

<u>Assertion 4</u>: Ordinary student affairs units become extraordinary when some programs are suspended to create the slack needed to enable some staff to do other, more interesting things.

Over the last decade, it has become quite ordinary to operate on the edge of the resource margin. The ravages of inflation and resulting fiscal austerity have left almost no IHE unscathed. At the same time, student affairs units ordinarily have added programs and services to a full plate of activities. This is certainly true of most residence life and student activities units. Yet most of the benefits of institutionalized programs are unknown. New programs are developed, usually with noble intentions but too often based on impressionistic information. Students' needs change over time, particularly when the students' demographic characteristics shift markedly. Yet the student affairs plate is piled higher and higher with things to do.

Some IHEs have established flex-time programs, and provide release time for staff to pursue research or assessment activities. But these practices have not always achieved the intended purposes. Some staff are reluctant to divert time away from their "real" job for fear their colleagues will have to work even harder to pick up some of their former responsibilities. As a result, they feel guilty. Sometimes the very staff for whom such policies are designed to advantage protest because they are reluctant to part with a program to which they have devoted considerable time and energy. Some supervisors are fearful that if staff are allowed to do interesting but what may be considered not absolutely necessary activities, the unit will be vulnerable to budget drawdowns. That is, if the unit can get along for a few weeks without Sandy (who has been given release time for a research project), perhaps the unit can get along without Sandy for a year...or more. Of course, this speculation depends entirely on what is considered "necessary". Staff and organizational renewal through slack or flex time is necessary (Clark et al., 1984), particularly in units in which, for all practical purposes, staff are essentially "tenured." Targeting programs and services for suspension presents a difficult political challenge. A policy is not enough; to institutionalize this practice, the CSAO may have to personally convince the candidate most likely to succeed to initiate a release time project.

Leadership Behavior

Assertion 5: A leader trancends ordinariness by using formal and informal theory mediated by a clear sense of what is important to the individuals with whom they are interacting.

As Barnard (1938) wrote almost 50 years ago, "the individual is

always the basic strategic factor in any organization" (p. 139). More recently, this theme has been reiterated by Cross (1984), Kanter (1983), and Peters and Waterman (1982). Most student affairs staff have no difficulty accepting the notion that the individual is the key element in the institution. After all, this line of thinking is wholly consistent with the Student Personnel Point of View.

It sounds simple, almost pedestrian, to declare that extraordinary student affairs staff tailor communication to the characteristics and needs of the reciever. This principle usually is covered in introductory undergraduate communications courses, but apparently only a few are able to translate this principle into action. Extraordinary leaders use what they have learned about life, from textbooks, from classes, and from those more like than less like themselves.

Leaders in student affairs are expected to know and behave in a manner consistent with human development goals. That's ordinary. But it is extraordinary when the Director of the Union becomes aware of a 44 year old staff member's interest in collaborating with other persons across the campus with whom such interactions are well beyond usual performance expectations. Some might interpret that interest as an attempt to consolidate power or to become more important in the institution.

But the extraordinary union director sees in her middle-aged colleague the shift from figure to ground common to professionals in mid career; that is, the staff member is in transition in his personal and professional life, changing from a focus on tasks specific to a narrowly defined professional role to an interest in integrating newly acquired knowledge and expertise within his evolving personal and professional identity. This sometimes takes the form of efforts to express or use non-dominant aspects of the self. For example, using Kolb's (1981) terms, a

student affairs staff member with "accomodation" tendencies will probably move gradually toward "assimilation," a conceptually rich way of describing the differentiation and integration phenomenon described in Sanford's (1962, 1967) provocative prose.

What drives or motivates colleagues ? Are staff motivated by money, recognition, altruism, status, physical trappings, titles, other perks, or some combination? The extraordinary leader is not always certain which combination of these is operating but he or she resolutely but cautiously "presses the buttons," until discovering to what the receiver resonates.

This may appear manipulative or even Machiavellian. Such a judgement may be too harsh, for the extraordinary leader does not have personal gain foremost. Certainly the leader benefits when staff perform well. But extraordinary leaders do not have the time, the inclination, or the ability to attempt to influence everyone in the organization. Usually there are just too many other mundane but important matters that require attention.

Extraordinary leaders are not extraordinary all the time on this dimension. They are human and have blind spots. If they have been around long enough, there surely are some persons in the organization from whom the leader has become alienated. Like Casey Stengel said, "The secret of leadership is to keep the six guys who hate your guts from talking to the six guys who haven't made up their minds about you."

Assertion 6: The ordinary student affairs administrator takes a large step toward extraordinariness in recognizing the process by which tacit information is transformed and applied.

Extraordinary leaders have examined and continue to reflect on their

own theories about human and institutional behavior--they are relective practitioners. Reflection in action "consists of on the spot surfacing, criticizing, restructuring and testing of intutition...it oftens takes the form of a reflective conversation with the situation" (Schon. 1984, p. 42). Part of what is learned through reflection is the importance of intuition, or some similar sensing process that incorporates tacit knowledge when responding to unique, stressful situations which require quick action without time for calculation or analysis. Barnard (1938) described these as "non-logical processes...those not capable of being expressed in words or as reasoning, which are only made known by a judgement, decision or action. This may be because the processes are unconscious, or because they are so rapid, often approaching the instantaneous, that [we cannot analyze them] (p.302).

Polanyi (1961) offered a concrete illustration of the use of tacit knowledge: "We know a person's face and can recognize it among a thousand, indeed among a million. Yet we usually cannot tell how we recognize a face we know...We recognize the moods of the human face, without being able to tell, except quite vaguely, by what signs we know it...(p. 4).

Assertion 7: It is really quite extraordinary when a leader can create--out of multiple realities--a shared vision of a supportive work environment in which staff and students can be productive.

It is really rather ordinary for student affairs administrators to use, as a guiding principle, phenomenology, or the notion that reality is in the eye of the beholder. In almost every field--psychology, physics, brain theory, poetry and so on, evidence can be found to illustrate a shift in paradigms away from "causal scientism" and a belief in a single

shared reality, to a world in which multiple realities and ways of knowing are becoming more widely recognized (Kuh, 1984b). In some ways, this view is not new to those weaned in graduate school on Rogerian, non-directive counseling approaches. The concept of individual differences, another cornerstone of the SPPV, is also compatible with the emerging paradigm. Accepting the premise of the existence of multiple realities is becoming more ordinary.

Perhaps some extraordinary leaders use magic to create a "shared reality," the illusion of an organization under control, when--in fact--the leader can exert little direct influence over many aspects of organizational life. Maintaining the integrity of the illusion of a student affairs division under control may be essential to carrying out daily activities. Illusion is not a pernicious spell however, and, like theatrical magic, the illusion works not because the leader believes, but because the audience believes! We allow the illusion to be cast and we behave accordingly because we want to believe--because we want the organization to be successful. Illusion also is important because it enables the student affairs unit to function not because of what the leader does but because of what staff think the leader is doing and what staff do in response to what they think the leader is doing and thinking!!

Extraordinary leaders induce colleagues to see or to imagine what is achievable and to help enact a setting or culture in which such attainments can be realized. According to Shakespeare and Seneca, neither of whom became distinguished for contributions to organizational theory, "all the world's a stage" [and] "It is with life as with a play--it matters not how long the action is spun out, but how good the acting is." Unusual leaders are able to think and behave as if they have the

lead role in a melodrama that plays daily on the student affairs stage. They create complex roles for themselves; they are sometimes protagonists, but frequently accept lessor parts, depending on the plot and the other characters. But they recognize that they are not creating a make believe or fantasy world. Rather, extraordinary leadership "is a willful act where one person attempts to construct...for others" (Greenfield, 1984, p. 142) a preferred culture, an environment in which values are clearly communicated and in which opportunities are penciled into the script as they emerge.

Extraordinary student affairs leaders have a flair for the dramatic and an ability to be expressive in speech, writing and gestures (Trice & Beyer, 1984). In fact, because leaders "traffic so often in images, the appropriate role for the manager may be the evangelist rather than the accountant" (Weick, 1979, p. 42).

Assertion 8: The capacity to identify and take advantage of opportunities is characterisitic of extraordinary performers (Hunter & Kuh, 1985; Samson, Graue, Weinstein & Walberg, 1984).

The extraordinary student affairs administrator continually scans the environment (Crandall, 1984), looking for opportunities that will bubble up, sooner or later, usually from unexpected places at unexpected times. Whetten (1984) believes "aggressive opportunism" distinguishes "gatherers" from "hunters." "Gatherers forage passively in an immediate area for enough...to satisfy daily needs. Hunters aggressively pursue a quarry as far as necessary and recognize that survival depends upon cunning and strategy" (p. 41).

It is easy to adopt a "gatherer" mentality in student affairs. Impressionistic evidence suggests that student affairs work is not always

considered by faculty to be integral to the primary aims of the academy. A gatherer mindset is unfortunate, for even in times of retrenchment, exceptional staff are attracted to centers of opportunity which are not necessarily always associated with conditions of growth. Even in units that face base budget reductions, Programs can be consolidated or suspended to permit staff to colloborate on new projects or appealing professional development activities such as research and evaluation efforts. Extraordinary student affairs leaders are on the prowl for talented staff and transform some problems and turn them into opportunities to excel.

Assertion 9: Extraordinary student affairs leaders are truth-tellers.

There are many pressures on leaders to avoid or to overlook the truth. Many of those with whom we must deal on a daily basis are personal friends whose feelings and camraderie are important. Telling an unpopular truth today may place the leader at risk tomorrow when a favor or expression of support would be welcome.

Extraordinary staff are integrity personified; they do not rely on the sacred totems of the profession as rationalizations (e.g., "do this because students will benefit," "it is for the good of the university," etc.). They allow truth to speak for itself. "Language is power. It literally makes reality appear and disappear. Those who control language control thoughts...We build categories [and vocabularies] to dominate [others]...(Greenfield, 1982, p. 8).

When speaking with outsiders or with those who are confused or feel alienated, extraordinary leaders convert coded messages into meaningful information. They refuse to use professional jargon even with those who

know the language. They tell the truth, as they know it, with obvious respect for the message and the receiver.

Assertion 10: Extraordinary leaders in student affairs spend--and enjoy spending--inordinate amounts of time in important job-related activities (Vaill, 1981).

It is not unusual for high producers to report 60-80 hour work weeks. In fact, it is difficult for high producers to separate their profession from other aspects of their lives. Of course, when at the office or on the campus, extraordinary leaders are on task. But even at home, in the garden, on a run, at the beauty parlor, at the beach, or on the ski slopes, extraordinary leaders practice their craft, allowing their minds to sift through job-related puzzles.

This preoccupation is not debilitating, however; that is, most extraordinary leaders do not describe themselves as "workaholics". In fact, the clinical definition of workaholic does not accurately describe the behavior of high producers. Workaholics are driven to do something--anything--related to the job. Extraordinary leaders focus on the opportunities which constantly are bubbling up. Attention is given to important issues, not trivial or mundane matters (however important the trivial or mundane are, such activities rarely require extended periods of concentrated thought).

Another factor that differentiates the high producer from workaholics is that the extraordinary contributor generally displays positive affect. In spite of spending many hours, the extraordinary staff member revels in the work. Most days, he or she cannot wait to get to the campus to identify and to take advantage of another opportunity. Of course, some days are better than others, but on balance, the extraordinary leader

would rather be a student affairs professional than do anything else.

Assertion 11: **Humor in leadership is extraordinary when the leader listens to and reflects on what others is consider funny.**

A sense of humor is a common characteristic of successful student affairs professionals. Humor is thought to be related to spiritual, psychological, and physical well-being. Some intentionally interject humor in conversations, often to relieve tension or to demonstrate affinity with colleagues. These are important but rather ordinary examples of humor.

People often make jokes about topics that are actually of concern to those who laugh the loudest ("What's the sense of humor?" 1984). Attempts to make light of problems are one way of dealing with anxiety. The extraordinary leader may laugh along with his or her colleagues but not without noting possible links between laughter and concerns or issues that may be worthy of attention.

Another extraordinary thing about humor and leadership comes from De Bono's work on creativity (Liversidge, 1985). According to De Bono, humor is by far the most significant phenomenon in the human brain because it demonstrates lateral thinking--the escape from the mundane perceptual path to another path. De Bono tells of an airline pilot who has a medical checkup and learns he is in fact almost blind. But the pilot needs to fly for another year to get his full pension. When the doctor asks him how he's able to land the plane, the pilot explains that he uses the Jesus Christ method: "I point the nose down, and when the co-pilot screams, 'Jesus Christ!' I level off."

De Bono thinks that humor generates creativity by releasing

endorphins, a chemical substance found in unusual amounts in the brain when creativity is at work (endorphins also are the body's natural pain killer!). Apparently engaging in good humor is not only good for the soul, psyche and body, it contributes to creative or lateral thinking. So the widely accepted practice of attempting to put guests or participants in meetings at ease by telling a story may actually get the endorphins going and encourage creative thinking.

Assertion 12: Extraordinary leaders resist making "much ado about nothing."

Confirmation bias, or the tendency to look for information that will confirm rather than disconfirm a hypothesis, is often at the root of superstition, self-fulfilling prophecies, and "the intensity with which we maintain subjective impressions about...other people" (Hearst, 1984, p. 19). Confirmation bias also explains why persons tend to emphasize the positive points of their work, and minimize or invent explanations for negative results (Bolland & Bolland, 1984), and why seemingly disparate events are linked causally even though supporting evidence may be non-existent (Allan & Jenkins, 1980). In other words, it is human nature to seek out another event rather than the absence of something to account for what takes place. There are dangers in doing so as Perrow (1979) warned:

> "[The] desire for order...is a contemporary phenomenon. The ancients tried to make sense out of things also, of course, but they had greater tolerance for happenstance, accidents, mysteries, illogicalities, and, above all, for fate... For us, the theology of the ancients is full of contradictions--"messy," a systems theorist would say. The ancients did not give very

sensible accounts, and failed, often even to attempt to do so. This puzzles modern social scientists who make a living at giving sensible accounts, whose training and examinations rest on this presumption..."

"There is no room in the various brands of psychology and psychiatry, for example, for the explanation that the motive for an action is an idle one, or that an event is the result of a crazy collision of accidental circumstances that no can foresee or intend. Or that there was really a big misunderstanding. Or that the act was simply ill-informed, poorly thought through, and not sensible or rational, and that all people commit a fair proportion of such acts."

But most persons are not comfortable with uncertainty, and counter by rationalizing.

"[But] rationalization...indicates an attempt to make things appear...rational that are not particulary rational at all and certainly not clearly understood...Rationalization is not disguising our motives but disguising our limitations. We may not be as smart as we think, but we are smart enough to construct explanations that will make it appear that we are smart." (pp. 3-5).

Conclusion

Enough is now known about extraordinary behavior in institutions of higher education that ordinary student affairs divisions can be transformed into "high performing systems" (Vaill, 1981). Promoting any or all of the characteristics described above will not require additional

resources other than those already present: energy, ingenuity, and a desire to excel.

At the risk of trying to appear "smart," imagine what would take place in an extraordinary student affairs unit. Picture a place in which risk-taking and innovation are encouraged, where opportunities for personal and professional renewal are available to all, but resources are concentrated on those most likely to benefit. Imagine a division of student affairs in which all staff recognize the importance of the quality of their daily interactions--however routine, and where the mundane, trivial aspects of their jobs are recognized and valued.

Imagine what an institution would look like if certain programs were discontinued to provide opportunities for selected staff to do interesting, provocative things, a place where student affairs professionals use what they have learned from theory and life experiences to help students and colleagues excel. Is it possible for staff to think about and learn from their own thinking and behavior, to adopt a hunter mindset, and to aggressively transform problems into opportunities?

What would life in the student affairs division be like if an extraordinary leader was able to create a shared image of what is important; a place in which rationalizations and jargon are minimized and where truth and humor become springboards to excellence. Just imagine how extraordinary the student affairs workplace would be if these behaviors were the norm...

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